WELLESLEY PARK
Vicinity of Wellesley Crescent Park, Arlington Neighborhood
Redwood City
San Mateo County
California

HALS CA-44
CA-44

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY
National Park Service
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HALS NO. CA-44

Location: Vicinity of Wellesley Crescent Park, Arlington neighborhood, Redwood City, San Mateo County, California
Lat: 37.49090 Long: -122.24323

Significance: The Wellesley Park subdivision is significant as a progressive subdivision planned as an early (1888) commuter rail suburb of San Francisco. It is an early Picturesque suburban development in the Bay Area, and the first suburban development in Redwood City west of El Camino Real. The development was sponsored by Daniel O'Connell, a founder of San Francisco's Bohemian Club, who envisioned and designed it as an exclusive suburban enclave. O'Connell was a journalist and writer who worked for the San Francisco Chronicle and published several books of poetry and other writings.

He designed the subdivision in partnership with local landscape gardener William Brown. O'Connell died in 1899, but had abandoned the project some time before then. The development was brought to fruition by George C. Ross, a prominent local attorney called the 'dean of San Mateo County,' about 1906. Nonetheless, O'Connell's vision for the development as it appeared in his 1889 promotional brochure prevailed. The significant aspects of the subdivision – the layout of the roads, the park, the landscape concept, platting pattern, and streetscape design – is as apparent today as it was in O'Connell's brochure. The subdivision itself still embodies the most progressive ideas in suburban design from across the country from the period. It was a landmark design in Redwood City and perhaps in San Mateo County.

History: The Wellesley Park subdivision is roughly rectangular in shape. It is bounded by Whipple Avenue on the south, El Camino Real on the east, Cordilleras Creek on the north, and Ashley Avenue the west. It was platted with a looping, internal roadway with very few connections to the grid system of streets to the north, south and west. Edgewood Road, the main street in the subdivision today, was designed to parallel the Creek, which accounts for its irregularity. Arlington Road completed the main loop that was the primary circulation system. Finger Avenue was a pre-existing road on the north side of the subdivision. The focal feature, which was on the east side of the subdivision, was a traffic circle called Wellesley Crescent and Wellesley Park within it.

Five roads in the subdivision terminate at Wellesley Crescent. Three are connected to El Camino Real on the northeast edge of the development (El Camino Real in turn paralleled the rail line). The major roadway system as envisioned by O'Connell in 1888 still exists, although additional roadway

connections have been made to the exterior street grid over the years. Wellesley Crescent Park remains the centerpiece of the subdivision. It is three-quarters of an acre in size and oval in shape. The entrance to the park is much diminished from its earlier days, although it still conveys a formal character and the lions to each side of the gateway are still extant. The setting of the park has been altered by the construction of apartment buildings on the north and east sides. The presence of mature landscaping, however, ensures that the park remains an oasis in the midst of this development.

A few properties in Wellesley Park that were early estate homes predate the platting of the area, including the oldest building in Redwood City, the Finger Farm House. This entire side of Wellesley Park in fact includes several atypical properties with unusually large lots that border Cordilleras Creek. Today the homes along this stretch represent a variety of architectural styles. Their siting is nonetheless representative of the earlier platting pattern and the styles fall within the Period of Significance for the subdivision.

The most significant period of development for the subdivision occurred in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Accordingly, the homes from this era represent a mix of 1920s Period Revival homes and Craftsman and Spanish Colonial-style bungalows. The last wave of development in Wellesley Park occurred in the mid-twentieth century. This era is represented by 1940s Minimal Traditional and 1950s Ranch-style homes. The later apartment buildings, seen along the north and east end of the subdivision, were constructed in the 1960s and 1970s. There are a few contemporary homes in the subdivision.

The houses within Wellesley Park are set at a slight angle to the street in the areas with curvilinear streets and with more rectilinear setbacks in the areas with straight streets. This, along with the curvilinear street patterns, lends variety the streetscapes. The landscaping is mature, including substantial evergreens scattered throughout the subdivision. Some lots are fenced and some are not, but consistency is maintained by the fact that lot frontages tend to be marked with landscaping or other features, if not with fences. There are sidewalks on both sides of the streets, which are separated from the street with a planting strip.

Although there is a mix of architectural styles within the subdivision, the houses tend to maintain the overall scale of the neighborhood. Most of the homes are small in comparison with today's standards, in keeping with the historic period. Even the Ranch-style homes tend to respect the scale of the neighborhood, due primarily to their low profiles. An exception to the overall scale is the larger estates on the northern portion, some of which predate the subdivision (the Finger House on Finger Avenue on the north side of the subdivision is considered the oldest home in Redwood City (Goodman, 1964:10).

Another exception is the few over-scaled contemporary homes, which do not display the same relationship to street or yard that the older homes do, nor the prevailing height in general. Most of the changes to the neighborhood consist of second story additions to the rear of the homes, to achieve additional space for the owners. These are more and less successful, depending on scale, materials, design and appearance from the public street.

Historic Context

In general San Mateo County became known for the large country estates of San Francisco's pioneers of industry, although this was less the case in Redwood City than in nearby Menlo Park and Atherton. The Wellesley Park subdivision, however, was designed to appeal to a wealthier class of clientele than was typically seen in working-class Redwood City, and it in fact did. Historian Mel Scott attributes the few sales that did occur in the earliest days to Daniel O'Connell's salesmanship and social connections through the Bohemian Club. In general, however, it attracted few buyers in these early years, due in part to the Panic of 1893, which slowed the economy across the nation. After O'Connell's death the project was taken over by George C. Ross, a local attorney, who had the streets (as envisioned by O'Connell) dedicated to public rights-of-way in 1906.

Sales within Wellesley Park, as well as the Peninsula in general, took off after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire, when the middle class began to build summer and permanent homes in the area *(Scott, 1985:83)*. An article in the Redwood City Democrat on October 17, 1907 stated that new construction in Redwood City was "rushing in to fill the demand" and "there is not a room in the city." Property values were said to have increased by 50 percent, and savings deposits in banks doubled. The author asserted that over a million dollars had been put into new private buildings and residences: "Realty men have on file many inquiries for residence sites. Railroad building and extension of trolley lines are bringing thousands of acres nearer the city and making available for residence purposes large tracts that have formerly been reached only by highways . . . Never before was the outlook so good for a large increase in population."

Accordingly, the second and most significant wave of development for Wellesley Park occurred in the first quarter of the century. Homes from this era most closely characterize the built nature of the neighborhood today. They are bungalows – Craftsman and Colonial Revival bungalows – and Period Revival homes, including Tudor Revival, Pueblo Revival, and Colonial Revival. They are typically modest in size, primarily one and one-and-a-half story homes with

relatively simple architectural detailing that associates the homes with their stylistic influences. Nonetheless, by 1924, which would have been an active year in the development of Wellesley Park, seven people and/or families listed in The San Francisco Blue Book and Club Directory lived in Wellesley Park or Wellesley Crescent, of the total 46 people in Redwood City listed in the Book. The third wave of development in the subdivision consisted of the mid-century Minimal Traditional and Ranch Style homes within the Park. This era represents, for the most part, the build-out of the subdivision.

Development of the Subdivision

Wellesley Park was laid out in 1888 in the new Picturesque style of landscape design by Daniel O'Connell and William Brown, a landscape gardener. William Brown, who lived in Redwood City, laid out the roads and planting beds, planning street trees and other vegetation. Daniel O'Connell is also credited as a designer of the subdivision, although he was a journalist and writer by trade. It is clear however that he was the project's chief promoter, as he retained the title of "Promotions Manager."

The Wellesley Land and Improvement Company was formed with 31 shareholders. Groundbreaking for Wellesley Park occurred in 1888 and was recorded in Redwood City's Times and Gazette on September 18th: "On last Monday, Admission Day, the Wellesley Park Company laid the corner stone of the massive gateway which is being constructed at the entrance to the park, and guests of the Company from San Francisco and Redwood City to the number of about 100, assembled in view of the ceremonies. The first improvement is to be the construction of the massive, arched gateway of granite, the corner stone of which was laid last Monday. This is 84 feet wide, finished with iron trimmings, and mounted above the center of the arch is the bronze figure of a deer" *(Cloud, 1997:6).*

The article went on to describe the features of the monument and the contents of the time capsule with it, which included a list of the officers of the organization. An article in the Times and Gazette on October 13, 1888 announced that one of the first property owners in the new subdivision had plans to build "an elegant stone residence with a slate roof, the cost of which will run well into the thousands."

By early 1889 it was announced that streets were being graded, ornamental trees planted, and work had begun on the lodge at the main entrance. The lodge was to

be designed in "an architectural combination of the Lakeside and Elizabethan. This will be the residence of the Park Superintendent, whose duties . . . will comprise a general guardianship of the properties of the residents, the employment of minor gardeners for carrying out of improvements, etc., and an attention to such details as marketing orders, mail matters and other affairs in that connection" *(Cloud, 1997:5)*. The workers who were laying out the roads and planting beds worked under the direction of landscape designer William Brown. The papers announced that Mr. Daniel O'Connell of Redwood City was the designer of the park.

The 163-acre tract was close to county roads and the Redwood Station of the commuter rail line. The entry design was described as "the most pretentious one on the coast." The tract as a whole was announced as "the most ambitious piece of landscape gardening yet attempted by our real estate men." Additional design features of the tract included the 100-wide entrance driveway and 10-foot wide walkways separated from the street by Australian rye grass, then another strip of grass, then linden trees. Two crouching lions that 'protected' either end of the park were designed by a Belgian sculptor named Gaff, according to the description, and between the lions was another feature of the park, the ruins. They consisted of a copy of a Norman tower and Saxon tower connected by a 'curtain wall overrun with ivy." In a further bit of romanticism, "In the Norman tower hangs a curfew bell, which will be rung to announce the arrival and departure of the trains." Additional plantings included Abyssinian bananas, palms, "and other unique designs for a residence park."

The park, as described in the press, appeared to be quite progressive not only in its design but in its management: "The Park, being a private holding in the sense that its exclusiveness will be the care of each resident with the aid of the superintendent and his employees, every ornamental shrub and every bit of landscape gardening will become by this unanimity of sentiment a common property" *(Cloud, 1997:6)*.

A brochure on the development, edited by Daniel O'Connell, and entitled "Views in Wellesley Park" was published in 1889 by H. S. Crocker & Co. of San Francisco. It contained sketches of the future development, mostly featuring landscaped grounds and horses with riders, horses harnessed to small buggies, and strolling pedestrians. It described views within Wellesley Crescent, and included extensive descriptions of the planned exotic foliage, plantings, and animals in the park. The favorable climate, the setting and exemplary schools, the design of

streets, soils, and plantings, were outlined, and the picturesque effects of the curving roads and mature landscaping emphasized.

The development was intended to be exclusive: "In order to effectually protect the interest and comfort of those who make their homes in Wellesley Park, the name of each intending purchase is submitted to a committee of gentlemen selected from the share-holders, who pass upon his desirability as a resident. Should he be deemed an unwelcome addition, the price of a Wellesley homestead is set so far beyond his reach that the hint is conclusively positive" *(O'Connell, 1889:6)*.

The suburbanization and ease of access to the Santa Clara Valley as described in the brochure was premature: "With this increased population will arrive the necessity of a more perfect system of railroad facilities. A double-track is the inevitable sequence of the general land distribution which has distinguished this year. This project is generally known as the 'shore line' and will bring Redwood City within thirty-five minutes of San Francisco. Therefore, within the very near future, Wellesley Park will be as accessible to San Francisco as the Western Addition" *(Views of Wellesley Park)*. The suburban boom did not happen until after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire, and the subdivision was not substantially developed until after the 1920s, when it became more easily accessible by car.

Daniel O'Connell

Daniel O'Connell, who conceived Wellesley Park, was a journalist and founding member of the Bohemian Club of San Francisco. O'Connell was from Ireland and arrived in America as a midshipman in the British Navy. After two teaching positions, he found his vocation as a reporter for the San Francisco Chronicle. He is said to have penned the name "Bohemian Club," and was especially popular for his contributions to entertainment venues of the club *(The Bohemian Club, 1872 – 1972:104)*.

O'Connell's project to develop the Wellesley Park subdivision fell short due in part to the Panic of 1893 and he retired first to Monterey and then Sausalito, where he died of pneumonia in 1889. His eulogy attested to the great esteem with which he was held by his Bohemian Club colleagues, despite his failures as a real estate magnate. It affectionately read, "It occurred to them [fellow members of the Bohemian Club] that of all men to be publicity and promotion manager Dan

O'Connell was the very ideal – which of course, he was not" (The Bohemian Club, 1872 – 1972:104). His funeral was held at St. Mary's Cathedral.

George C. Ross

Attorney George C. Ross was responsible for the actual development of Wellesley Park, which was spurred in part by demand after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire. The plat of Wellesley Park Subdivision 'A,' which extended from El Camino Real to just south of Somerset, and from Finger Avenue to Arlington Road, was "dedicated to public use" by Ross on March 19, 1906. He certified that the roads and lots in Subdivision 'A' were the same as those delineated on the "Map of Wellesley Park, San Mateo Co. Cal" recorded with the County on November 26, 1888, under O'Connell's tenure.

George C. Ross was known as the 'dean of San Mateo County.' Ross' wedding to Miss Mary Donald, who was the second white child born in San Mateo County, occurred on December 24, 1877 and was attended by 700 friends and relatives. They had three sons: Hall C., Lee T., and Dr. Donald Ross of San Jose; he later founded a law partnership with sons Hall and Lee. His obituary in the Redwood City Standard stated that he was "one of the guiding lights" in political affairs in California for nearly half a century" *(March 8, 1928).*

Urban Design Context

The design of the Wellesley Park subdivision, a Romantic or Picturesque suburb, was progressive in its time. Its design was influenced by the latest ideas in landscape and suburban subdivision design pioneered in the last half of the nineteenth century by designers such as Frederick Law Olmsted, H.W.S. Cleveland and Calvert Vaux, primarily on the east coast. The prototypical subdivision designed in this new style, which represented an outgrowth of the Romantic landscape movement, was Llewellyn Park in New Jersey. The second model development at this time was Riverside, Illinois, designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux in 1869. Both sought to 'provide amenities and homes that, built at comfortable density, afforded privacy in a naturalistic park-like setting.' A third example, closer to home, is the Piedmont Avenue development, known as the Berkeley Property tract and designed by Olmsted in 1865.

The Picturesque suburban development represented a criticism of the prevailing grid-iron pattern of land subdivision practiced at the time, developed to facilitate land development and real estate speculation. This development pattern became

associated with the crowded and substandard urban conditions that characterized many growing cities at this time. The concept of grand free-lined boulevards was popularized by Haussmann's redevelopment of Paris and adopted in many American cities in the nineteenth century. The Picturesque suburban tract added the concept of the winding lane, which became inextricably linked with the suburban ideal *(Jackson, 1985:76)*.

Llewellyn Park was the first completely planned suburb and the first planned suburb to incorporate undulating roads for an entire community *(Jackson, 1985:73)*. In addition to the street design, the design of Llewellyn Park included an open space within the development to promote the importance of exercise and fresh air. The goal of Llewellyn Park's benefactor was to create a "retreat for a man to exercise his own rights and privileges" *(Jackson, 1985:77)*.

The open space at Llewellyn Park was intended to have a naturalistic feel. The naturalistic design expression was felt to reinforce the values of the subdivision designers. Its management was progressive as well. Its care was entrusted to a "Committee of Management," to be elected by the landowners and whose title was held by three trustees *(Jackson, 1985:78)*. The concept of the curvilinear road and natural open space at the center of the development were unprecedented at the time and became hallmarks of the Picturesque suburb. They can be seen in subsequent developments that emulated this model, including Wellesley Park. Wellesley Park also emulated Llewellyn Park with the design of a formal gatehouse and in the management concept for the central open space.

Llewellyn Park began the tradition of carefully planned suburbs that was to be a central concern of American and British architects in the twentieth century. This and later similar models 'attracted families . . . away from cities by creating a complete environment that fulfilled expectations of a tranquil life, close to nature, with urban comforts' *(Jackson, 1985:79)*. While Llewellyn Park was popularly received, however, the concept of suburban development on large lots (they were two acres in size) in a park-like setting, as well as the cost and time of the railroad commute, ensured that this and similar developments were reserved for the well-to-do.

Precedent for the design of Wellesley Park on the west coast was established by Olmsted in the Berkeley tract, if only in the streetscape design. The Berkeley Property tract was Olmsted's first fully developed landscape plan for a residential suburb and served as a model for his subsequent residential tract boulevards. Similar to Llewellyn Park, Olmsted intended the Berkeley tract to be an exclusive

retreat from congested life in the city. Its social and health benefits were exemplified by its physical layout, as explained by Olmsted, with "large domestic houses, on ample lots with garden set backs, enhanced by sidewalk boulevards and plantings that would become luxuriant and graceful to shelter the visitor from the sun" *(Cerny, 2006)*.

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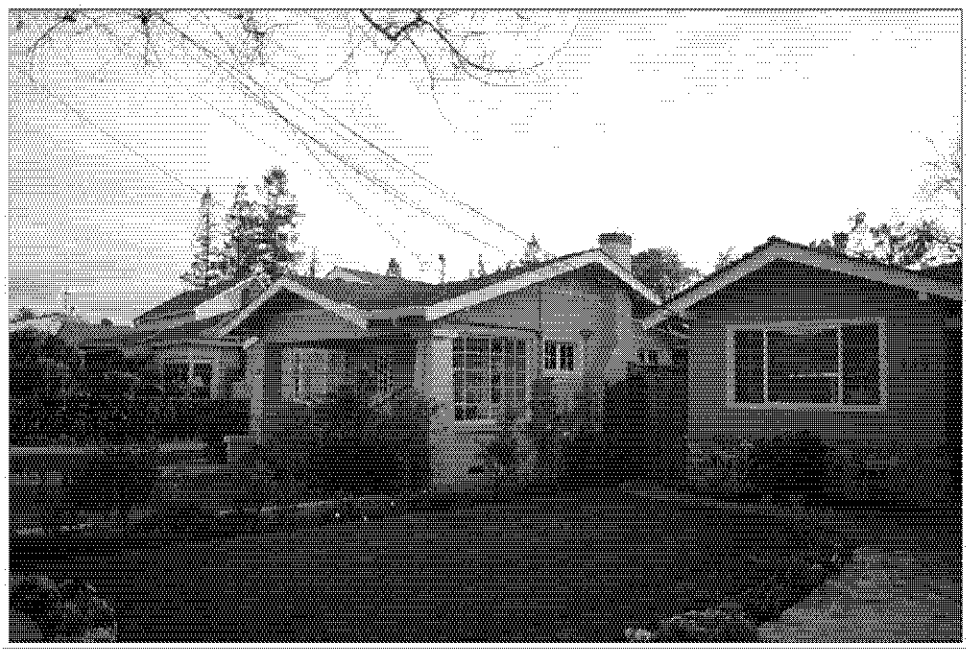

Figure 1: Contemporary streetscape views in 2005 show the typical development character (Diana Painter, 2005).

Figure 2: Contemporary streetscape views in 2005 show the typical development character (Diana Painter, 2005).

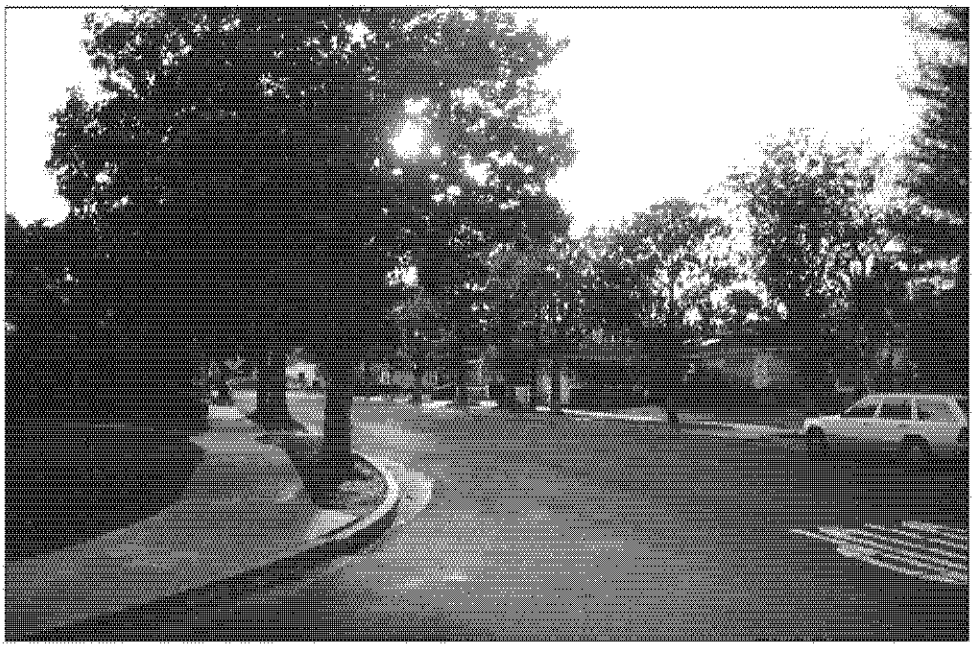

Figure 3: Typical streetscape today (Diana Painter, 2010).

Figure 4: The entrance to Wellesley Crescent Park today (Diana Painter, 2010).